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*CAN PRAGMATISM FURNISH A PHILOSOPHICAL
BASIS FOR THEOLOGY?*¹

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In order to establish a negative answer to this question, one would simply have to show either that pragmatism itself is not tenable, or else that it can afford theology no adequate support. To establish the affirmative, however, it would be necessary to show in the first place that pragmatism is in itself tenable, and in the second place that it is compatible with and gives some real support to theology. But for the would-be theological pragmatist himself neither of these positions can be readily accepted as established without the other. On the one hand he cannot say that pragmatism supports theology unless it is itself tenable, for, if untenable, so far from being the philosophical basis of theology, it cannot be a real basis for anything. On the other hand the person who finds religion essential cannot, on pragmatic principles, accept pragmatism, if it is not at least compatible with the fundamentals of religion and theology—unless, indeed, he needs pragmatism more than he needs religion. While beginning, then, by inquiring whether pragmatism is tenable or not, it must be recognized that a final affirmative answer cannot be given until we have considered the question of the bearing of pragmatism upon the essential affirmations of religious faith.

The investigation of the question, Is pragmatism tenable? involves, of course, the preliminary inquiry, What is pragmatism? To answer this question fairly is no small task in itself.

A common attitude toward the whole pragmatist movement is expressed in the criticism, "If it is new, it is nonsense; if it is old, it is obvious."² When it is affirmed that true judgments

¹ A paper read before the Baptist Congress, at New York, Nov. 9, 1909.

² E. E. Slosson, *The Independent*, Feb. 21, 1907.

must be ultimately satisfactory, and that none but true judgments can be really satisfactory as working principles in the service of legitimate human interests; that indeed all true judgments about reality are actually or potentially useful, so that the experienced usefulness of a belief indicates with more or less probability its truth,—most thinkers agree that this is obviously true. There is an intimate relation between the truth and the practical utility of judgments, but the truth, they say, is something to be established independently of the usefulness; we test the truth first and find it useful afterwards. Such a position may be called semi-pragmatism, but it is not pragmatism proper.

Many of those who criticise pragmatism seem to regard it as the doctrine that all satisfactory judgments are true, simply by virtue of their giving satisfaction to some particular desire; that all judgments found useful in the realization of purposes are, to the extent of their usefulness, true. Now it is undoubtedly true that much of the popular so-called pragmatism is of this sort. And Professor James himself often uses such unguarded expressions that he has to complain, in spite of his popular style, that he is very generally misunderstood as teaching some such doctrine. For example, in his book entitled *Pragmatism* he says, "Truth is only the expedient in the way of our thinking" (p. 222), and again, "On pragmatic principles we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it" (p. 273). And yet in his latest work, *The Meaning of Truth*, he characterizes as "silly" and "an obvious absurdity" the view attributed to him "that anyone who believes a proposition to be true must first have made out clearly that its consequences *are* good, and that his belief must primarily be in that fact" (pp. 272f.), or "that whatever proves subjectively expedient in the way of our thinking is 'true' in the absolute and unrestricted sense of the word" (p. 231). Now this doctrine which Professor James seems at times to teach, but which he strenuously repudiates, is very evidently, as it has been characterized, nonsense. It is what the newspaper wit had in mind when he wrote, "The Eskimos would seem to have a strong natural leaning toward pragmatism." This may fairly be called

pseudo-pragmatism, for it would be a very superficial judgment which would identify the essence of the whole pragmatic movement with this absurd doctrine.

But if the essential nature of pragmatism consists neither in the doctrine that all true judgments are useful, nor in the doctrine that all useful judgments are true; if it must be differentiated from semi-pragmatism, which is obvious, and from pseudo-pragmatism, which is nonsense, just what, then, is it? What escape is there from the horns of this dilemma? Now it is the fault of the typical absolutist critic of pragmatism that he has a passion for expressing every movement and tendency in the form of a universal principle, and it is his mistake to suppose that when he has refuted the principle he has virtually annihilated the movement. And it may very well be that the proper pragmatist easily avoids both horns of the intellectualist's dilemma.

The fairest way to answer the question, What is Pragmatism? is to settle it pragmatically. In pragmatism, then, what is the practical attitude? What does it really propose to do? To this the answer is that it proposes, in any crisis in which a judgment is demanded, to take the most promising suggestion as a working hypothesis and test its truth by the way it *works*. If the hypothesis has been thoroughly tested and has worked satisfactorily, it is properly called not only useful but true. Thus usefulness is taken as a mark of truth, although it is not claimed universally that all judgments that are subjectively useful or temporarily satisfactory are objectively true. But further, pragmatism takes as its working hypothesis that every test there is for truth can be stated as a test of working, and that the results of speculation are problematic until verified in the experiences of life.

It will be seen, then, that pragmatism proper does not make for a greater laxity of thought, but rather for a more rigorous and extensive application of the principles of scientific method. Now in all scientific judgment the predicate is regarded as a mere trial-predicate and the judgment is made purely hypothetically at first, in order that by acting as if it were true it may be shown by the manner of its working whether the best hypothesis was

used, that is, whether the best trial-predicate was employed. And pragmatism, as we have intimated, does not propose to find a substitute for science in the study of nature or history, nor to change scientific procedure, nor to discredit in any way the results of scientific investigation. On the contrary it establishes scientific procedure as its model, and undertakes to make philosophy, with which it is chiefly concerned, more scientific. If there is to be thinking about any reality beyond the reach of the phenomenal sciences, that thinking must imitate those sciences as far as possible; it must refer to experience wherever it is able to do so and find truth only through some kind of verification of working hypotheses. This surely is a tenable position.

But pragmatism is young and vigorous, and it has exhibited a good many overgrowths and excrescences that will doubtless be pruned away in time. To some extent this is already taking place. Early pragmatism tended to discredit system, consistency, and the so-called theoretical interest. Schiller of Oxford was especially pronounced in this respect. But now it is more usual to find the practical set forth, not as opposed altogether to the theoretical, but as including it as a special type of the practical. Science was described by Professor Dewey six years ago as "just the forging and arranging of instrumentalities for dealing with individual cases of experience."³ But what shall we say about the pursuit of science as something interesting apart from its further application; what about the interest in truth for its own sake? This is now interpreted as an instance of the shift of interest whereby the process of securing means to possible practical ends becomes interesting and an end in itself, the original practical purpose being lost sight of, and this new purpose being now itself an active principle, organizing other activities into its service as means.

It is to be expected also that pragmatists will give up the somewhat dogmatic assertion that any particular truth has only temporary value. There is a manifest contradiction, as has been repeatedly pointed out, in stating universally that there is no universal truth, assuming that it will be permanently satisfac-

³ The Logical Conditions of Scientific Treatment of Morality, p. 8.

tory to hold that no truth will permanently satisfy, that all things else are in a flux and only pragmatism has come to stay. To guard his position the pragmatist must say that it is simply his working hypothesis that all truths will prove ephemeral; but as a matter of fact he tacitly assumes that some truth at least will be permanently valid, and he might more consistently adopt as his working hypothesis that some human judgments will be abidingly true.

Again, there is a decided tendency among pragmatists to go beyond the hypothesis that the only way to test truth is by an experience of its working, and to assert that truth is a species of utility. Of course this does not necessarily involve the crass utilitarianism that has been charged against pragmatism, but which really belongs to what we have styled pseudo-pragmatism. And yet, for the following reasons, it is questionable whether pragmatists may not prematurely identify their position with this doctrine. In the first place the doctrine that truth can be accurately and adequately defined in terms of utility can be established, if at all, only after a thorough analysis of the psychology of meaning and of the judging process, and after an adequate examination of the representational theory of truth. Again, the statement lends itself very readily to misinterpretation on the part of critics, thus hindering the acceptance of what truth there is in pragmatism. In addition to this, when taken as a principle it tends to lead one into making statements which come dangerously near to pseudo-pragmatism. And, lastly, since one can set forth, as above, the essence of pragmatism without making use of this disputed principle, on the pragmatic ground that no difference should be recognized unless it *makes* a difference, the pragmatist should perhaps content himself with the irreducible minimum definition of pragmatism as the hypothesis that there is no test of truth which is not essentially a test of usefulness in some concrete situation. The necessary—that is, what man really needs to believe in order to live as he ought—is true. And this fundamental hypothesis of pragmatism is still a working one; it has not been shown to be scientifically untenable.

But even if one should accept the essential postulate of prag-

matism, it does not follow that he must accept all that can truly call itself pragmatism. For even in essential pragmatism wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to theological destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby.

At the very gateway of pragmatism there is an obvious downward path whose finger-post points in the direction of animalism. It is undoubtedly true that originally consciousness and in man the judging process were valuable chiefly as means of better adjusting the animal organism to its environment, so that the physical life might be preserved and propagated. In that primitive situation the biological function of judgments, that is, the way in which they functioned in the service of the physical life of the individual and of the race, was, roughly speaking, an index to their truth. But when it is assumed that not only then but now and always the only test of truth is its function in man's struggle for physical existence, we have an animalistic pragmatism which cannot be adequate to the demands of man unless he is satisfied to live simply as an animal. In criticism of this type of pragmatism attention may be called to the notorious fact that in conscious life new interests are constantly developing, many of which are not centred in the fate of the physical organism at all. Moreover, these new interests peculiar to man as a spiritual personality may lead to a transvaluation of all former values, so that instead of life's being interpreted in its lowest terms, as the physical existence of the individual and of the race, it is interpreted in its highest terms, as the spiritual development and efficiency of the individual and society. Then, instead of consciousness and judgments being regarded as mere means for the promotion of the physical life, the physical life is regarded as simply or chiefly instrumental in the promotion of the conscious life in its spiritual aspects. The ideal interests no longer exist for the sake of the physical, but the physical life for the sake of the ideal. Or, as Professor Montague puts it, "Man began to think in order that he might eat: he has evolved to the point where he eats in order that he may think."⁴ Instead of the animalistic type, then, we are led to a humanistic pragmatism, in which the truth of judgments is

⁴ *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. vi, p. 489.

tested by their utility in the service of that life of the individual and of society in which all the peculiarly and legitimately human interests are recognized as being of primary importance. Once the ends in view are thoroughly accredited, it may be assumed that those judgments that are ultimately necessary for the achievement of these ends are valid. Thus, in the sense of what is humanly necessary, necessity remains the test of the truth of judgments.

But sometimes humanistic pragmatism presents itself in an extremely individualistic form. That Dr. Schiller does not entirely escape this is shown by his assertion that two men "with different fortunes, histories, and temperaments, ought not to arrive at the same metaphysic, nor can they do so honestly."⁵ But over against individualistic pragmatism which would make usefulness or necessity for the individual the sole criterion of truth, pragmatism is coming to state more clearly that it is the function of ideas in the social situation that is the test of their truth. For example, Professor A. W. Moore says, "When the pragmatist talks of attention and thought as arising at the point of a need for readjustment, this need must not be taken to mean the need of some one lone, marooned organism or mind only. The readjustment is always in and of a 'social situation.'"⁶ The humanistic pragmatism, then, to be defensible, must be of the social rather than of the individualistic type. It is not in merely individual but in social utility and necessity that truth is assuredly to be found.

But, once more, even this type of humanistic pragmatism may vary according to the interests which are recognized as genuinely and legitimately human. For example, there may develop on the one hand a positivistic pragmatism in which the distinctly religious interest is repudiated, and on the other hand a religious pragmatism in which, along with the social, scientific, aesthetic, and moral interests, the distinctly religious interest is recognized as essentially human and valid, so that judgments which are really indispensable to the promotion of the highest

⁵ *Studies in Humanism*, p. 18.

⁶ *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. vi, pp. 382-3.

type of religious life are regarded as validly claiming our acceptance as true.

Just here is the crux of the question as to the relation of pragmatism to theology. There are some with whom pragmatism is a methodological principle for accrediting the postulates of religious faith with regard to realities that transcend phenomenal experience. There are others who employ their pragmatism to discredit speculation and assertions about transcendent reality generally; they do not recognize as legitimate and significant for philosophy the religious interest which requires to express itself theologically. But theistic religion must accept, and, I take it, is ready to accept, the challenge of pragmatism. Any pragmatic philosophy which is to satisfy the whole man at his highest and best, and the race at its highest and best, cannot afford to ignore a religion which meets fundamental spiritual need with abiding satisfaction, and which necessarily expresses itself in a theology for which it just as necessarily claims objective validity.

Now pragmatism in alliance with religion is not a new thing under the sun. Exactly that which gave to the Ritschlian theology its vitality and appeal was its religious pragmatism. But the Ritschlian pragmatism was partial; it was applied to religious judgments only, leaving scientific and philosophical judgments apparently on an entirely different footing. In keeping with this absolute distinction between theoretical and value-judgments, it refused to mediate philosophically between its dogmatics on the one hand and the sciences and philosophy of nature on the other. Its pragmatism was thus dualistic in its tendency. It encouraged the impression that certain judgments were valuable and valid in theology, but not in philosophy. The outcome in many cases was that instead of being a thoroughgoing religious pragmatism to the exclusion of positivism, Ritschlianism became a partial and dualistic pragmatism, religious in theology and positivistic in philosophy. This ignoring of the logical principle of contradiction is a characteristic of pseudo-pragmatism. Ritschlianism began well in its pragmatic doctrine of religious value-judgments; it should have gone further and recognized the pragmatic character of all real

live judgments as opposed to fossilized propositions, and then, instead of keeping the religious value-judgments in unhealthy solitary confinement, it should have brought them out into the philosophical arena to try conclusions with other judgments about reality. In other words, Ritschlianism made its chief mistake in not seeking to mediate between the scientific and religious views of the world, taking the essential ideas of religion as working hypotheses in philosophy.

But it is not to philosophy alone, but to life generally, that we must look for the solution of our ultimate problems. The lack of finality in speculation is due to the limitations of philosophy when abstracted from life. With regard to the most fundamental convictions, what is lacking in philosophical demonstration is to be made up by the demonstration of life. Reflection can never furnish a philosophy of reality which can afford to dispense with its bearing upon the moral well-being of society as a test. And, indeed, a philosophy that settled all problems apart from life would be no servant of life, but a substitute therefor, such as mediaeval scholasticism often tended to be.

Still it must be equally emphasized that it is not to life without systematic reflection, such as philosophy is, that we must look. That would not be fulness of life which ruled out philosophy. Life is to be guided by reflectively developed hypotheses which subsequent life-experience either confirms or rejects. Or, to state it differently, the verification of consistency is to be regarded as an essential part of the verification of life, for, after all, the interest in consistency or rationality is the interest in harmonizing the various practical interests recognized as valid.⁷

Thus it will be seen that the kind of use one makes of pragmatism in philosophy depends upon the kind of interests and purposes one has, and so, ultimately, upon the kind of man one is. He who uses pragmatism—or pseudo-pragmatism, to speak accurately—in order to justify the rejection of scientifically obtained results in any department of human investigation, is dishonest at heart. And on the other hand, as Dr. Schiller

⁷ Cf. A. K. Rogers, *The Religious Conception of the World*, p. 71, a suggestive book in connection with our present topic.

significantly says, "A perfect and complete metaphysics is an ideal defined only by approximation, and attainable only by the perfecting of life. For it would be the theory of such a perfect life."⁸ And, we may add, philosophy must make room for a saving gospel for the individual and society, if it is to be pragmatically verified.

So much, then, may be expected to result from pragmatism in epistemology; religious knowledge must be integrated with other knowledge in the final philosophy. If we turn now to a very brief consideration of the bearing of pragmatism upon ontology, we find that the standing of ontology is in dispute among pragmatists; there are some who profess to dispense with it altogether as either unimportant or impossible or fictitious. Nevertheless it must be evident that wherever there is room for epistemology there is room for ontology; if there is knowledge, there must be reality known.

Professor Dewey has indicated what he conceives to be the pragmatist theory of reality in two articles entitled respectively "The Postulates of Immediate Empiricism"⁹ and "Does Reality Possess Practical Character?"¹⁰ In the former he says that if we want to know what anything is we must go to immediate experience and ask what the thing in question is experienced as. In the latter essay he says that pragmatism means the doctrine that reality possesses practical character; that knowing reality changes it; that, in fact, knowledge *is* reality changing itself in a definite way. Now it would be very easy to interpret this in terms of a solipsistic pragmatism, according to which reality would be just what the individual takes it to be, and individual psychology would be the only possible ontology.

But the charge of solipsism pragmatists meet with a vigorous disclaimer,¹¹ and we are given to understand that it is to social psychology that we are to make our ultimate appeal in order

⁸ Studies in Humanism, p. 21.

⁹ Journal of Philosophy, vol. ii, no. 19.

¹⁰ Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James, pp. 53-80.

¹¹ See, for example, the article by A. W. Moore in Journal of Philosophy, vol. vi, no. 14.

to know what reality is. The ideas we use are social products; the realities we recognize are social achievements, and they are what they are to the social consciousness.

But are we to understand, then, that this exhausts their whole reality? What about realities which we know to exist, but of which humanity has never had immediate experience? What about the centre of the earth, the other side of the moon, and the south pole, for instance? Is their whole reality their existence in human minds as mathematically deduced hypotheses? It is evident that the postulate of immediate empiricism, while valuable as far as it goes, is not a sufficient criterion for the definition of reality so long as it does not recognize an experience which transcends not only the individual man, but all humanity. Common sense and pragmatism are both right in affirming that we know reality, and that we know it as it is, in immediate experience. But it is equally compatible with common sense and pragmatism to say that we do not and cannot know reality completely, because we do not experience it fully. But we have to think about this reality which transcends immediate human experience, and as a matter of fact we do think of it and have to think of it as it would be to some one to whose experience it was immediately present. Why not assume, then, according to pragmatic principles, that this necessary way of thinking of it indicates the true way, and that in reality although not present to immediate human experience it is immediately present to some experiencing subject?

To sum up, then: we have criticised pragmatism as it is, and attempted to depict it as it might be and ought to be. Our main results are two. Pragmatic epistemology, to be consistent, must make room in its philosophy for the essential postulates of the religious consciousness. Pragmatic ontology, with its postulate of immediate empiricism, to be consistent, must make room for an experiential (spiritualistic) philosophy of reality including but transcending all human experience. These are two points. Taking the shortest distance between these two points we get a straight line indicating that pragmatism can furnish a philosophical basis for theology.